

A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF THE IAMSLIC LISTSERVER

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ABSTRACT: The IAMSLIC Listserver was examined for one year, September 1997 through August 1998. A previous IAMSLIC study had examined this listserver as a vehicle for interlibrary loan requests. These now account for 40-60% of the traffic in a given month, an increase from earlier. A 1997 comparative study of 10 professional library listservers over one month indicated that the percentage of interlibrary loan requests on the IAMSLIC listserver is higher than for many other listservers. However, there are also many other types of questions and information posted to the listserver. This paper discusses the characteristics and possible trends of messages posted to the IAMSLIC Listserver.

INTRODUCTION

Nearly all IAMSLIC members have been using, or at least, reading, the IAMSLIC Listserver, many of us since it was established in 1991. It plays an important role in our work, and it is time to look at it and document what it is being used for, as well as who is using it.

Aside from a natural interest in examining this much-used service, two previous publications inspired this work. At the 1996 IAMSLIC Conference, Barbara Butler presented the results of an 18-month study of the use of the IAMSLIC Listserver for interlibrary loan (ILL). She documented an increase in ILL requests over the period from February 1995 to July 1996 and reported 370 ILL requests out of a total of 1745 messages (Butler 1997). It seemed likely that these figures had changed since then. The other impetus was my participation in a one-month study of 10 science and technology librarian mailing lists in late spring 1997 (Duda *et al.* 1997). One of the lists looked at was the IAMSLIC Listserver. Other listservs examined included ones for librarians specializing in natural history, biology, botany, chemistry, engineering, and geology. We reported, among other things, that the IAMSLIC Listserver was more international, less used for discussion, and more used for ILL than the other lists examined. The differences were attributed to the greater number of librarians using the list who worked at small isolated libraries than was the case for users of the other lists. The methodology and results of this study indicated that a similar study concentrating on the IAMSLIC Listserver for a whole year could be very useful.

METHODS

The IAMSILC Listserver was examined for one year, September 1997 through August 1998. All messages were archived, with the messages for each month in a separate file. All messages were examined after the month was complete. Each message was examined twice. After a random examination of a number of messages to determine content categories, a list of 40 probable categories of messages was constructed. The final tabulation had 38 categories (Table 1). The number of messages in each category was recorded for each month. Categories at the top of the list included ILL-related messages, duplicate offers, requests for address information, reference questions, and requests for citation information. Other categories included requests to subscribe or unsubscribe (sent by error to the listserver), software and website information, library procedures (especially cataloging), and occasional spam problems.

A second table was constructed for the origin of the messages, including all probable countries, with space for recording separate States of the United States and Provinces of Canada. The initial table included almost all places where messages originated over the year, with only a few additions needed later. As the study progressed, several names were eliminated from the list when no messages appeared from these places. In the second examination of all messages, the origin of each message was recorded on the origin table.

RESULTS

Categories. Over the period September 1997 through August 1998, there were 2122 messages sent to the IAMSILC Listserver (Table 1). This far exceeds the 1745 messages recorded over 18 months in 1995-1996 (Butler 1997). The maximum number of messages (245) was in July 1998, the minimum (124) was in December 1997. The number of messages varies greatly from month to month, but over the year there appears to be a slight increase.

Interlibrary loan (ILL) requests made up the largest proportion of each month's messages. Over the year there were a total of 626 ILL requests (29.5% of all messages). ILL requests as a percentage of all messages were highest in June 1998 at 37% (N=51). The lowest percentage was 24.9% (N=61) in July 1998. ILL-related messages were classified into three categories: ILL requests, noted above; responses to ILL requests; and thanks for ILL requests filled. Figures for all these three categories together were added to give figures for a category called Total ILL. Total ILL for the year was 952 (44.9% of total messages). Total ILL reached a high of 58.6% (N=112) in February 1998 and a low of 40.4% (N=99) in July 1998. The figures for ILL are much higher than those recorded earlier by Butler (1997), but in contrast to that study, there was no obvious trend upward or downward over this year. ILL messages were not analyzed for type of materials requested. Butler (1997) measured a success rate of 22% for all ILL requests, based on responses to requests, but noted that the rate was probably higher because responses may not have been sent to the whole list. In this study, the ratio of total ILL thanks (182) to ILL requests for the year (626) indicates a success rate of 29%, but this too may not

reflect the true success rate, but only an improved response to the plea to inform the whole list when requests have been filled.

The figures indicate that although ILL is the most important part of the IAMSLLIC Listserver traffic, it usually represents less than half of all messages. After ILL, the next highest number of messages concerned offers to give or sell duplicates. This is the only category that showed an obvious increase over the year. It ranged from a high of 18 messages in October, February and March, to a low of 11 in May, then there was a jump to 21 messages in June and then 63 in July, ending with 40 in August. The next category was requests for addresses, either e-mail or other. This was highest in November (11 requests) and lowest in August (2 requests) but no trend was evident. The next categories in total volume were general reference questions that might be asked in a science library and requests for citation information/verification. A category was established for software information, and when discussions increased about Ariel, these messages were recorded in this category. In all there were 46 messages in this category.

The Library Procedures category included all discussions of cataloging. It accounted for 36 messages. Two spam attacks and the resulting complaints and discussion about them resulted in 10 messages in October and 11 messages in February, but otherwise there were practically no spam problems.

Despite clear instructions on subscribing to the list, and reminders that subscription requests are not to be sent to the IAMSLLIC Listserver, there were messages to subscribe or unsubscribe sent in error every month, as many as 7 in March and July, and 48 for the whole year.

IAMSLLIC-related messages were divided into three categories: IAMSLLIC business, conference information, and news. IAMSLLIC Business accounted for 18 messages over the year, but all four categories together had only 35 messages. This listserver is not used much to discuss the organization, but rather to assist in library business.

Of the 38 categories of messages, 7 had fewer than 10 messages, and 14 had fewer than 20 messages, out of the total of 2122 messages.

Origins Messages were sent to the IAMSLLIC Listserver from a total of 42 countries (Table 2). In addition, 21 messages were posted from unknown origins. Messages were sent from 26 states of the United States and from 7 provinces of Canada (Table 3). Of the total 2122 messages, 1153 (54.34%) came from the United States, followed by Australia with 175, Canada 159, Mexico 73, Chile 62, and South Africa 62. Scandinavia was represented only by Denmark with 32 messages and Iceland with 19 messages. A total of 15 countries sent only one message each and 23 sent fewer than 10 messages each. With the exception of Switzerland, all messages originated from countries with seacoasts, which indicates the continuing prominence of marine libraries as opposed to freshwater aquatic libraries.

From the United States, 1153 messages were sent from 26 States (Table 3), with 251 (21.77%) of them originating in California, followed by Florida with 230 (19.95%), North Carolina 80 (6.94%), Oregon 59 (5.12%), and Hawai'i, with 51 (4.42%). Of the 26 States represented, only 5, Illinois (1 message), Minnesota (1), Utah (5), Wisconsin (1) and Wyoming (4) have no seacoast, again indicating a marine bias.

From Canada, 159 messages were sent from 7 Provinces (Table 3), 45 of them from British Columbia (28.3%), followed by Québec, 38 messages (23.9%), Newfoundland 33 (20.75%), Nova Scotia 16 (10.06%), New Brunswick 14 (8.81%) and 2 inland freshwater Provinces, Manitoba, 9 messages and Ontario, 2 messages.

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSIONS

This study indicates that this listserver is indeed a valuable tool, with continued high usage. Usage is much higher than was reported two years earlier. The variation from month to month is considerable, but there appears to be a slight overall increase over this year. It is noted that the second and third lowest numbers of messages were late in the study, in May and June respectively, followed by the highest number of messages in July, so any trends are somewhat obscure.

In common with most other science/technology listservers (Duda, et al., 1997), the IAMSLIC Listserver is not primarily a "discussion" list. There is little debate or discussion of theoretical questions. The listserver is used to assist daily library work. It is primarily used for ILL, requests for information about locations, techniques and procedures, or announcements of publications, conferences and job openings, etc.

The IAMSLIC Listserver is not a moderated list. Anyone can post a message to the listserver and it appears without intervention. Thus the ILL function, which has achieved prominence on this listserver is open to anyone, IAMSLIC member or not. Moderators play various roles, including filtering out unwanted messages, facilitating discussion, or providing expert answers to questions posted to the list (Berge 1992). Control of ILL traffic could be one reason to consider having a moderator for the list. However, the moderator's job involves considerable time and effort and also slows the posting of messages to the list, so a decision to moderate the list should not be taken lightly.

Examination of the origins of messages indicates that this is indeed an international listserver. Traffic is dominated by messages from the United States, but these only account for 54% of the total. The top 7 countries originating messages are on 5 continents. No analysis was made of types of institutions sending messages, but the analysis of countries, states and provinces indicates a strong bias toward marine libraries. It is not known how many EURASLIC librarians use this list in addition to, or instead of, a strictly EURASLIC list, which might have a stronger freshwater aquatic bias, but it is noted that European countries rank lower than many others in the frequency of origins of messages.

The IAMSLIC Listserver is popular and working well and seems likely to continue. Although ILL accounts for much of the traffic, the listserver is also used for many other topics, and it appears that this mix of uses is functioning well. It would be useful and interesting to repeat this study in the future, perhaps in 5 years or sooner.

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Table 1.

IAMSILIC Listserver: Messages by Category

	09 97	10 97	11 97	12 97	01 98	02 98	03 98	04 98	05 98	06 98	07 98	08 98	ALL
ILL Requests	47	51	45	44	47	65	57	61	44	51	61	53	626
ILL Responses	16	14	18	20	19	26	16	25	7	16	14	13	204
ILL Thanks	17	12	13	6	13	21	15	21	15	9	24	16	182
Total ILL	80	77	76	70	79	112	88	107	66	76	99	82	952
Duplicate Offers	17	18	12	12	15	18	18	12	11	21	63	40	257
Addresses/Contacts	7	13	16	4	12	7	8	15	6	7	14	2	111
Reference	10	11	4	6	10	8	17	11	2	5	2	13	99
Citation Info	6	10	1	5	8	5	15	15	9	5	14	5	98
Publications/Articles	2	8	2	3		4	19	3	6	8	3	5	63
Subscribe	5	3	1	1	5	2	7	5	3	6	7	3	48
Software/Anel	5	3	1		7	1	5	14	9	1			46
Serials Info	3	5	3		1	6	2	6	1		7	9	43
Websites/WWW Info	7	4	5	5	8	3	3	1	1		2	4	43
Library Procedures	2		3		11	2	5		6		6	1	36
Spam/Hoax	1	10	1	1		11	4						28
Job Announcements		3	1		6	1	1	4	4	1	3	2	26
IAMSILIC Business	5	3		1	2	1	2	2			1	5	22
Marine Science News			5	1			5			1	6	5	22
Library Policies	1	6	5	1	1	1	2	1		1	1	1	21
Databases	1	1		2	2		4	1		1	3	3	18
Institution Info	1				3	2		1	1		1	6	15
IAMSILIC Listserver	2	2				1			3	2	3	2	15
Conferences	1	3		4		1	1	1			1	1	14
Publisher/Vendor Info	1							4		2	6		13
Colleague News	1	2	2	4	1		1					1	12
IAMSILIC Conference	4	1				2			1		1	2	11
Library General Info		1		1	1	2		1	2		1		9
Humor	3			1	1			1					6
Internet Info					1			4	1				6
General Discussions	1			2*					2				5
Personal Info	1	1						1	1				4
Journal Paper Call		1							1			1	3
IAMSILIC News							1				1		2
Total N =	167	186	148	124	174	191	204	215	137	138	245	193	2122

*Holiday Greetings

Table 2.

IAMS LIC Listserver: Messages by Origin

	09 97	10 97	11 97	12 97	01 98	02 98	03 98	04 98	05 98	06 98	07 98	08 98	Sum
United States	96	107	73	63	105	109	109	135	60	64	127	105	1153
Australia	17	16	6	12	21	12	21	15	14	10	19	12	175
Canada	4	9	9	11	11	24	12	9	13	9	32	16	159
Mexico	8	3	2	5	9	5	6	10	5	8	3	9	73
Chile	1	2	5	3	2		9	10	7	5	11	7	62
South Africa	3	2	9	8	2	2	3	6	10	5	9	2	61
Germany		1	5	2	3	6	5	2	3	5	2	6	40
Philippines	7	2	7		3		5		2		5	3	34
United Kingdom	2	7	3	2	3	5	2	3	1		3	2	33
Denmark	1		1	4	1	1	1	1	1	3	11	7	32
New Zealand	3	4	1	1	6	2	1	2	2		5	4	31
France	1	5	2		2		5	3	5		2	5	30
Italy	1	5	8	2		1	6	1	2	3	1		30
India	1	2	2	2	1		7	5		4	2	2	28
Bermuda	3	4	5	3	2	3				2	2	2	26
Fiji		4	2	1	2	2	2	3	5	2	1	2	26
Iceland	1	5	1	1	2	4	1	3	1				19
Barbados											6	5	11
Greece	2		1	3						3		1	10
Brazil	1							2	2		2	2	9
Cuba					1	3		4					8
Malaysia					2			2		1		3	8
Switzerland	1	3	2					1				1	8
Spain		1	2	1			1			1			6
Jamaica						1		4					5
Russia					2						3		5
Ukraine						1		1		1			3
Belgium						1							1
China								1					1
Ecuador	1												1
Guam					1								1
Hong Kong										1			1
Ireland									1				1
Netherlands							1						1
New Caledonia	1												1
Pakistan							1						1
Palau										1			1
Peru									1				1
Singapore							1						1
Taiwan							1						1
Thailand									1				1
Virgin Islands							1	1			1		1
UNKNOWN	1	3	1	1		6	1	3	1	3		1	21
ALL ORIGINS	167	186	148	124	174	191	204	215	127	138	245	193	2122

Table 3.

IAMSLLC Listserv: Messages by Origin: United States & Canada

	09 97	10 97	11 97	12 97	01 98	02 98	03 98	04 98	05 98	06 98	07 98	08 98	Sum
UNITED STATES	96	107	73	63	105	109	109	135	60	64	127	105	1153
California	23	25	17	21	25	29	26	33	13	17	29	20	251
Florida	18	20	20	10	27	24	25	16	9	12	27	22	230
North Carolina		12	4	5	3	15	7	9	7	3	7	8	80
Oregon	3	8	7	6	5	6	6	5	3		7	3	59
Hawai'i	5	4	4	3	4	3	8	7	4	4	6	3	51
Massachusetts	1	4	2			4	3	6	4	4		5	37
Texas	7	4	1	3	3	5	6	3		1	2	2	37
Maryland	6	5	6	5	1	1	2	2	14	1	3	7	33
Mississippi	4	1	3	3	4		2	3	2	1	3	7	33
Rhode Island	1		1	1	1	1	3	3	5	6	2	4	29
South Carolina	8	1					4	6	2	1	3	3	28
Alaska	2	3	17		3			1			1		27
Virginia	8	3	1		3	2	3	2	2		3		27
Louisiana	1	3			3		3	4	3	3	6		26
Connecticut		1	1		2	4	3	7	1	3	2		24
Washington			3	1	2	5	3	2	2	2	2	1	23
Alabama				2		5	1				2		10
D.C.		1		1			1					4	7
Georgia		4						2	1				7
New York	1		1			1	2	1	1				7
Utah	2	3											5
Wyoming	1							3					4
New Jersey	3												3
Illinois					1								1
Minnesota												1	1
Wisconsin											1		1
	09 97	10 97	11 97	12 97	01 98	02 98	03 98	04 98	05 98	06 98	07 98	08 98	Sum
CANADA	4	9	9	11	11	24	12	9	13	9	32	16	159
British Columbia	3	1	3	2	1	2	2	3	3	1	18	6	45
Québec		6	3	2	4	7	2		4	1	6	3	38
Newfoundland			1	4	2	8	3	2	3	2	4	4	33
Nova Scotia		1		1		3	1	2	1	5	2		16
New Brunswick	1	1	2	2	1	1	1	1	1		2	1	14
Manitoba					3	3	2		1				9
Ontario							1					1	2